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The Three Roots of Ill and Our Daily Life

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The Three Roots of Ill and Our Daily Life

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e live in a world of great material achievements and we are all fascinated by them. The riches of the world multiplied by modern industrial productivity draw the attention of all people who, then, wish to possess them, and to share the pleasures that can be bestowed upon them by the infinite variety of things invented by the restless mind of modern man, who is never content with what he just possesses and who is always seeking for something new.

This infinite variety of our modern technical civilisation seems to be something peculiar to our present age and it instils into us a sense of unhealthy pride and of being somehow placed above past periods and epochs of mankind's history.

The marvels of technical progress are the outcome of the external inventive activities of Western nations who thus gained an external superiority over the rest of the world. They have gained for themselves whole continents—America and Australia—and, for a long time, were forcing their supremacy upon the peoples

of Asia and Africa.

Now that almost all nations of these two continents are free and may shape their destinies according to their wishes, we see that the fascination of the technical civilisation affects them too, and that, to a serious degree, they neglect their own spiritual heritage, and are taking over from the West with its technical achievements even some ideologies and some pseudo cultural features of doubtful value.

But is our fascination by today's multiplicity of material things offered to us for enjoyment justified by their inner value? Is our eager pursuit of material things in ever new shapes something new and different from what, essentially, took place in previous times, in other epochs and civilisations? Is there behind it, something nobler and more worthwhile? Certainly not.

The Real Cause of External Achievements

At the root, or better to say, the very root of this everlasting pursuit of things that fills our life from the moment of birth till the moment of death, is craving and only craving, which manifests itself in manifold ways through our constant struggle to satisfy the

desires of our six senses.

It may sound an exaggerated assumption, but it is, notwithstanding, true that all the seemingly marvellous achievements of our present civilisation are nothing but the outcome of our blind urge to satisfy our craving for pleasurable sensations. When one particular craving is satisfied, another one arises. And to produce ever-renewed sensations, we blindly produce ever-new needs that clamour to be satisfied. If all our needs were made subject to a careful analysis, we should find out that the vast majority of them are superfluous and artificially produced.

There are, it is true, a few unavoidable needs which must be satisfied for us to survive. But who of us remains content with mere survival in satisfying his actual needs?

We have to eat. But though we are long past the stage of wild animals who feel only an instinctive urge to fill their stomachs when hungry, it is seldom that we give reasonable consideration to the quantity and constituents of our daily meals. Moreover, we have lost the soundness of the animal instinct. We seek to prolong and repeat more often than necessary the satisfaction we feel when stilling our hunger.

The pleasurable taste sensations connected with eating became important for themselves, no more

serving to the primaeval purpose of testing the suitability of the devoured food. And so we eat more than is necessary for survival and, which is still worse, we eat and drink things which are completely superfluous for, or even harmful to, the purpose of keeping our body and mind healthy and fresh (to say nothing of the completely foolish habit of smoking).

Clothing is, no doubt, one of our fundamental needs as well. It should protect us against cold or heat and various whims of weather and climate, and it may be adjusted to the customs of the country and time and perhaps even be up to a certain degree of elegance. But does this imply the pursuit of all the extravagant caprices of fashion? Here often craving manifests itself very strongly, especially in women (but in many men as well) who thus become the victims of the “law-givers” in fashion to whom the creation of new patterns in clothing serves as a source of considerable income.

Thus we could go on discovering the real needs of man and the manifold ways in which he, out of craving, exaggerates them, seeking to experience the repeated satisfaction of wish-fulfilment and the pleasurable sensation connected therewith. It is the sensual craving that manifests itself in this way—craving for pleasing forms, sounds, flavours, tastes, touches and ideas.

But this craving is never satiated. We usually identify our happiness with acquiring some particular sense-object. Soon after we have acquired it, however, we lose interest in it and another object appears to be desirable to us. Obviously, it is not the object that is desired, but the sensation connected with acquiring or using it. This sensation, lasting for a short time only, we have, in order to repeat it, to struggle to acquire the object again or, when the object has lost the capacity to produce the desired sensation in us, to acquire another object promising to do so; and so on endlessly.

The real cause of our willingly obeying the urge of sensual craving is not—as we presume it to be—an actual, positive state of happiness we should gain thereby. The sensation of pleasure felt in the moment of wish-fulfilment only pretends to be happiness. It is in fact, only an instantaneous relief of a tension caused by craving.

This tension is, in fact, ever present in our mind as a dimly felt unsatisfactoriness of our whole existence, of the ways and possibilities of our entire life in the form we know it. It is sometimes slight, but at other times it becomes almost unbearable and even causes deviations from the so-called normal states of mind and one speaks then of mental diseases.

However, even the so-called normal mind is every moment under the compulsive urge to find every possible means for the relief of tension. This is almost the only source of man's entire activities. Thus we live amidst suffering like a victim on a rack ladder. When the strain is loosened, we feel some ease, but soon the torturing tension is felt again.

The Second Cause of Entanglement

Craving, however, is not the only source of our suffering and entanglement. Seeking for pleasure we instinctively avoid all things unpleasurable, and when we cannot avoid them, we try to remove or destroy them, taking for granted that these obstructing things prevent us from attaining to happiness and thus cause our suffering. That is why we hate them and so we come to the second root of ill which is hate or ill will in many forms, obvious as well as hidden.

In spite of all the riches the modern world abounds in, in spite of its capacity to provide for the actual needs of everybody on earth, the world is far from the satisfactory state of affairs when there would be no starvation, no lack of clothing and lodging and of medical treatment for everybody. The unavoidable needs of a considerable part of humanity cannot be satisfied, while, on the other hand, another, though

smaller, part of it possesses the means thereto in such an abundance as not to be able to make actual use of them.

This state of affairs has been brought about by the exaggerated craving described above which blindly seeks to secure the means for gratification in greatest measure for an endless future without reasonable purpose. The artificial poverty and unnecessary misery created thereby becomes the source of hate which is dividing mankind, nations, natural groups of society and even families. Hence, all class-division appears to be artificial and superfluous, even when proprietary differences might not disappear altogether.

Hate, however, is no outside force. Like craving, it can be experienced by living beings only, by us. And we experience it only too often. Every deed we perform to obtain any privilege at the cost of someone else, every harsh word we pronounce to anybody, any thought condemning another living being is basically motivated by hate which, of course, may be crude or mild, intense or subtle. How often hate is hiding itself behind imagined "righteous indignation" or "well intended criticism," aiming, in fact, only at justifying our pursuit of satisfaction or our effort to avoid discontent.

It is almost universally admitted or, at least, it is felt that hate is an undesirable and unpleasant state of mind, and hence the effort to disguise it by justifying terms. Compared with craving, hate seems to be, in a way, secondary. Out of sensual craving for pleasure comes the craving for the existence of pleasing objects and the craving for the non-existence of unpleasant or obstructing objects and this is, in fact, hate.

Craving causes us to grasp the thing that promises to bestow pleasure upon us, and hate causes us to aim at the destruction of other things which prevent us from gaining the desired object. But to experience craving means, fundamentally, to be suffering, and so with hate. And to obtain the gratification of a particular craving brings about a new craving and a new suffering, and so with hate. Why is this so? Obviously, because both craving and hate are blind, are associated with ignorance.

The Primary Root of Ill

Ignorance is thus the primary root of all ill present in every action in deed, speech or thought, which is connected with craving or hate in pursuing an object of our craving. We take for granted that the acquisition or the possession of it will bring us lasting happiness. But this view proves to be false.

Nevertheless, we try again, changing perhaps, the object. In removing a hated obstacle preventing us from acquiring the desired object, we believe we have come nearer to our aim of lasting happiness, but this proves to be a false view as well.

Nevertheless, we still go on and only change, perhaps, the means we used till now. We may even turn to the pursuit of subtler objects, looking, for instance, for gratification in art instead of in the mere pleasures of the flesh, or, perhaps, even in philosophical speculations instead of in art. We may, too, considerably transform our hate—no more killing our enemies, no more destroying the careers of our opponents, but only avoiding or ignoring them; but still we remain caught in the net of craving, hate and delusion.

The subtler forms of craving and hate should become the objects of our circumspect attention; we should always be aware of their occurrence if we earnestly wish to do something about them. They often disguise themselves in very refined ways and even their grosser forms may outwardly look harmless or noble, being in fact, most pernicious for us, because they smuggle through into our subconsciousness almost unnoticed.

Thus, even the most appreciated works of art are

often coupled with, or inspired by sex, however hidden the links to it might be and however sublimated it may appear when closely analysed. But the impulses and seeds implanted by such works of art into the unconscious layers of our mind find response there and strengthen the urge in us to act accordingly when adequate conditions arise.

Thus, in such a refined disguise the sexual urge involuntarily gets a footing even where its grosser and more obvious appeals, such as the oversexed films and magazines of today, are purposely avoided as worthless or harmful.

Hate also finds its way into our minds in inconspicuous disguises. A warm love for one's motherland; an enthusiasm for a particular religion or ideology may seem to be harmless at the beginning and may appear to be an outcome of one's sense to adhere to the truth as one sees it. But too often we have seen such attitudes to evolve into open hate for enemies or into persecuting religious or political opponents.

Even if such an enthusiasm for certain ideas and philosophies remains limited to the intellectual level, these require to be formulated in opposition to the ideas and philosophies of the others which involves vain polemics, the stressing of the illusory importance

of one's opinions, and from this comes separation of oneself from other fellow-beings which is again a disguised form of hate.

All these various forms and degrees of hate that are usually not felt and not realised as such, become possible by one's deeply ingrained illusion of the importance of the things concerned, which are, in fact, unimportant and unsubstantial. Thus the ignorance is perpetuated.

A Way Out

Is there a way out of this maze, and a secure state of lasting happiness that is real and free from any delusion? We all know there is. To reach it, we must overcome and transcend the three roots of ill. But seeking for pleasure and avoiding pain is the natural course of conduct of all living beings which cannot be changed. Our question concerning the state of lasting happiness is likewise only the outcome of the same natural course of things when one grasps the impermanence, basic wretchedness and unsubstantiality of all pleasures connected with the six senses so that a new way out is looked for.

Once more we see that it is ignorance concerning the real, true happiness to be aimed at, that is the primary cause of all our endless and purposeless suffering. We

are ignorant of the fact that all pleasures of the six senses are of the phenomenal world and hence unreal. When we encounter them in life, they appear to us to be real, though immediately after they have passed, we may see their basic emptiness and illusory nature. However, we seem to be unable to draw a lesson therefrom and to direct our attention to the true nature of these seeming pleasures, only looking forward to new pleasures in future with an unexpressed and unfounded hope that once, perhaps tomorrow, after some successful revolution or after death in some paradise, these pleasures will be bestowed upon us forever and in some more perfect form.

This expectation of ours, to gain lasting happiness from outside through some sudden change of outer circumstances or by the act of some higher power, is the greatest delusion of ours today. And this is the reason why we must first try to disperse our ignorance, step by step. Can we do it ourselves and unhelped? I do not know. There may be and may have been people who acquired this liberating knowledge by themselves. But we need not bother ourselves about this problem, for we have got a true help. Our Teacher, the Buddha, the Awakened One, has left to us his incomparable Teaching that has been preserved through the ages in a form comprehensible enough for us to gain a kind of initial right understanding

necessary for stepping on the path to liberation from all ill.

Thus, we are able to take the first steps in overcoming ignorance if we make use of the help offered to us by the Awakened One. Provided with the first glimpses of right knowledge gained by the instruction in the Teaching, we become able to identify craving as craving in its various modifications and hate as hate in its various disguises. And we realise that we must cope with them everywhere if we wish to gain true happiness. How can we do this in our daily life?

The First Practical Steps

We must take care never to lose our first insight telling us that it is not the desired object that can bestow happiness upon us and that it is not the obstructing thing or being that is the cause of our tension, pain and suffering.

The cause of suffering is craving and only our overcoming or transcending this craving can bring us nearer to freedom and hence to happiness. Whenever craving or hate prevails, it will lead to deluded action in deed, words or thought and hence to further entanglement and prolonged suffering. To prevent the prevailing of both these roots of ill, we must

constantly maintain our insight concerning their true nature. In doing so, we are in fact coping with the basic root of all ill, with ignorance.

Practically, we may proceed in the following way:

1. Identifying. First we should identify craving and hate whenever they occur. That requires that we be constantly mindful and watchful as to the real motivations behind our deeds, words and thoughts. Usually we act, speak or judge in thought without actually knowing our real motives in the moment of performing the action. Later on, especially when a performed act has brought some disagreeable consequences upon us, we are more willing to admit that we were overwhelmed by a sudden attack of anger and lost our temper.

Sometimes we cannot even understand how we could have done this or that and we say it was stronger than us. But if we try, we cannot find any subject in us we could identify ourselves with, a subject that would be separate from the emotion or tendency to act in this or that way in the moment we felt driven to act according to it. Our separating ourselves from that emotion or tendency takes place in retrospective analysis only, i.e., when it is over and “we” are able to think again. This separation, which is additionally established, comes from thought that

postulates a fictitious subject being in possession of an emotion, but it is, by no means, an outcome of experience in the respective moment.

This proves that in the moment when we were acting out of craving, we just were that craving, and when acting out of hate we just were that hate. Or better expressed, there just was craving or there just was hate—in both cases, of course, connected with ignorance.

If we, however, maintain observant awareness of what is, of what we are experiencing in a moment of a strong feeling of some desire, anger, hate, etc., then “we” are not that desire, anger or hate, but “we” are that observing awareness and we can identify the desire as a kind of craving, the anger as a kind of hate, etc. Such a state of mind is not completely connected with ignorance. The watchful awareness represents here a degree of true knowledge and hence no deluded action can result out of it.

2. Pausing. This brings us to our second task. Whenever we want to perform an act, i.e., to do something, to say some word to anybody or to think, to draw a conclusion, we should first pause to see the motive of the intended act. Such a pause before the performing of an act would be, in fact, a natural result of our attitude of watchful mindfulness aiming at

identifying the lustful or hateful state of mind whenever it occurs, if we do succeed in maintaining it. But if we don't, then our preconceived intention to pause before acting to see the true motivation, may still help us to identify craving or hate if it is present.

How often we act, speak or judge under the influence of an immediate reaction to some event or to some deed or word of another person. Seldom can such a deed, utterance or judgement be called wise when examined by an impartial observer or, later on by us when we are in a quiet mood again.

Many problems in our lives could be solved with greater advantage, many families could live a more happy life, many a suffering could be avoided, if people earnestly tried always to pause for a fraction of a second to see the pressing force present in themselves that is driving them to do an unkind act, to say a harsh word, to condemn someone in thoughts.

3. Quick reflection. If we succeed in identifying the real motive of our act just before performing it, we may utilise the gap for a quick reflection whether it is worth being performed at all or not, which is our third task. When we identify one of the two roots of ill as being the motive or driving force urging us to do this or that, we shall most probably leave the act undone, without being obliged to struggle with it very much.

When the desire, repulsion or hate is strong and persistent, even when cognized as such, we may use all our capacity of reflection and imagination to call to mind the evil consequences of acting out of such a deluded state of mind. By constantly observing the desire or hate as an object, and not identifying ourselves with it, we are sure to see how it begins to fade.

In this way we shall, as already mentioned, drop many an intention, leave many a deed undone and many a word unspoken, and shall break many a harmful course of thought. In case we do not find any harmful motive, still a wise reflection may show us the purposelessness or futility of an intended act and we may dismiss it as well. Thus we shall avoid further useless entanglements. And only when our reflection shows us that the act we are going to perform is not only harmless, but useful to us or others as well, we shall accomplish it, making use of our alert mind sharpened through the attitude of watchful mindfulness.

The Safe Guide

We shall, it is true, not be able to decide always according to our own knowledge acquired through our own inner vision. Our insight may be still too

narrow or faint. But then we may take refuge in the instructions of the Awakened One who is our incomparable Teacher and a safe guide to the true goal.

There are in the discourses of the Awakened One, directions for both the advanced and the beginners, for monks and lay people; there is a code of discipline for the life in monasteries and a code of behaviour for the life in the world. It is only necessary to read and study them. The beneficial results of applying those bits of advice will be experienceable very soon.

When we gain a certain skill in maintaining the watchful attitude of mindfulness and thus become able to see the frequent occurrence of various forms of craving and hate in association with our consciousness, we shall discover the enormous depth and measure of our entanglement. Realising the fatal influence of hate, we shall not be willing to tolerate it anywhere, not even in the slightest forms of dislikes or resentments. Though not always able to cope with it perfectly, we shall constantly try to dissociate it from our mind.

The Subtler Forms of Craving

With the subtler forms of craving, however, it will be, for some time, different. We can hardly expect to find

ourselves capable of abandoning all desires at once. There are mean desires and there are desires we can, with a certain reservation, call noble.

We may succeed soon in giving up some personal desires, but we shall perhaps not abandon the desire to secure a certain standard of living for our family as long as the welfare of its members is dependent on us. We may succeed in controlling our sensual desires to a considerable degree, but we might not be, all at once, inclined to give up all aesthetic pleasure of music or art. Nor is it always advisable.

Art comes to us through the senses too, so that it must be, no doubt, abandoned as well when the time is ripe to do so, but more “earthly” pleasures should be given up first. In this respect we shall hardly take seriously the proclaimed desire to realise the ultimate truth—which presupposes, first, the abandoning of all worldly tastes and attachments—with those persons who are, for example, smokers or cannot do without two or three cups of coffee a day.

The aesthetic pleasure, if it is free from sex, may accompany us for a long time in our efforts to go along the Path and prove, sometimes, even helpful, especially that inspired by the beauties of nature. We only should not cling to it for its own sake, nor lose the notion of the final necessity of abandoning it. Thus

we shall not get lost in a vain or too enthusiastic pursuit of aesthetic pleasure, but on the other hand, will not try to suppress them by force altogether, if our inclination to it was quite strong. In the course of progress and as the result of occasional inner states of happiness connected with it, our interest in aesthetic pleasure will grow weaker until it will fall off as if of itself.

The final necessity of abandoning, or, better to say, the ultimate uselessness or purposelessness of aesthetic pleasures may be the more understandable to us the more we bear in mind the wise utterance of the Awakened One that even his noble Teaching is to be abandoned, not to be clung to when the right moment comes and one is standing on the threshold of the final deliverance; for this teaching, however noble, however consistent and however dear to us now, is similar to a raft for getting across and not for retaining.

This last step of putting aside the Teaching would be, no doubt, the highest and ultimate act of right mindfulness, the first steps of which we have tried to describe here.

Thus, if we are persistent and do not fall into sluggishness, grosser forms of craving will, one by one, fall from us and this will give us an experience of real relief, as the heavy burden we are carrying

becomes somewhat lighter. And also the hateful and malicious states of our mind will grow weaker and less frequent, allowing us to experience, in rare moments of mind-quietude, the foretaste of happiness of a liberal state of mind.

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